
STUDY GUIDE

City of Ashes

A complete reader's companion

by Cassandra Clare

The Mortal Instruments · Book 2

Summary · Characters · Themes · Analysis · Quotes

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Plot

Full summary
and analysis

Characters

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analysis

Themes

Major ideas
explained

Discussion

Questions for
study

About the Book

City of Ashes is the 2008 second volume of Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series, the first arc of the wider *Shadowhunter Chronicles*. The book continues directly from *City of Bones*, deepens the series's urban-fantasy New York, and introduces the Inquisitor, the Soul-Sword, and the dilemma — Clary and Jace believing themselves to be siblings — that will drive the next two books.

The *Mortal Instruments* series became the commercial anchor of a long *Shadowhunter* expansion that now includes prequels, sequels, novellas, and adaptations for film and television. *City of Ashes* is also where Clare introduces Maia Roberts, the werewolf girl who becomes a major series character, and where Simon's arc into vampirism begins.

Author	Cassandra Clare
First published	2008
Series	The Mortal Instruments · Book 2
Genre	Young-adult urban fantasy
Setting	Contemporary New York City — the Institute, the Bone City, Renwick's, the East River
POV / form	Close third person (primarily Clary Fray, with Jace, Simon, and Maia chapters)
Content notes	Violence; familial trauma; mild romantic content; depictions of cruelty

Plot Summary

Days after the events of *City of Bones*, Clary Fray is processing the revelation that the *Shadowhunter* Jace is her brother and that Valentine Morgenstern is the father of them both. Her mother Jocelyn lies in a magical coma; Valentine remains at large and in possession of the Mortal Cup, one of the three Mortal Instruments.

The Inquisitor, Imogen Herondale, arrives at the New York Institute determined to punish Jace for what she believes is his collusion with Valentine. Jace is imprisoned in the Silent City; on the night of his confinement, Valentine attacks, murders the Silent Brothers, and steals the second Mortal Instrument — the Soul-Sword. Jace is framed as the only survivor.

Meanwhile, downworlder politics escalate. A werewolf girl named Maia Roberts is hunted by demons; Simon, Clary's mortal best friend, drinks vampire blood at Magnus Bane's party and begins his slow transformation. Clary attempts to navigate a romantic relationship with Simon while still in love with Jace, whom she believes to be her brother — a tension the novel sustains rather than resolves.

Valentine kidnaps four downworlder children — vampire, werewolf, faerie, and warlock — to invert the Soul-Sword and turn it against *Shadowhunters*. The climax is a sea battle aboard Valentine's ship: the Inquisitor sacrifices herself to save Jace, recognising at the last moment that he carries her grandson's face; the children are rescued; Valentine escapes with the Soul-Sword. Simon, killed during the battle, returns as a vampire — and as a Daylighter, an impossible thing made possible by Jace's blood.

Major Characters

Clary Fray

Newly trained, newly grieving, and increasingly aware of her own runes — a power no other Shadowhunter has. Clary in book two is no longer the novice she was in book one; her arc here is learning to act on incomplete information.

Jace Wayland (Herondale)

The Inquisitor's target. Jace's storyline is the book's emotional centre — he is imprisoned, framed, freed, and at the end orphaned again by the death of the grandmother he never knew he had. His parentage is the book's quiet third act.

Valentine Morgenstern

The series antagonist. In book two he is offstage for much of the novel but structurally everywhere; his collection of the Mortal Instruments drives the plot.

Simon Lewis

Clary's best friend and, briefly, boyfriend. Drinks vampire blood, dies, returns as a vampire — and uniquely as a Daylighter. The book's most transformative arc.

Maia Roberts

A new viewpoint character. A werewolf girl introduced through a traumatic backstory, Maia provides the novel's downworlder perspective and becomes a permanent series figure.

Inquisitor Imogen Herondale

Antagonist of Jace and the book's most consequential reveal. Her late grace toward Jace reframes her entire arc and changes Jace's identity going forward.

Magnus Bane, Alec, Isabelle

The supporting Shadowhunter cast; Magnus and Alec begin their relationship; Isabelle continues as the Lightwood family's grounded centre.

Major Themes

Family Secrets and Inherited Identity

The Jace/Clary sibling reveal is the book's chief engine, but Clare layers the theme: Jace's hidden Herondale lineage, Maia's family history, Simon's vampiric rebirth all turn on what a person inherits without consent.

Coercion and Sacrifice

Valentine's project is to coerce his children — Jace and Clary — into his vision of the Shadow world. The Inquisitor's death is the book's first explicit instance of an older woman choosing to die so that the young can survive.

The Cost of Power

Every magical act in the novel carries a price. The Soul-Sword is the book's metaphor: an instrument of truth that, inverted, becomes an instrument of destruction.

Love Across Categories

Clare uses book two to widen the series's romantic field — Magnus and Alec, Clary and Simon, Maia and Simon, Jace and Clary — and to insist on the legitimacy of unconventional pairings even within the constraints of the Shadowhunter world.

Key Motifs

- **The Mortal Instruments.** Cup, Sword, Mirror — the book continues the series's long inventory of objects that focus power.
- **Runes.** Clary's ability to invent runes is reintroduced; the body-as-text remains the series's signature.
- **The river.** The East River, the sea battle, baptism imagery around Simon's death — water as transformation.
- **Locked rooms.** Jace in the Silent City, Jocelyn in her coma, Clary at the Institute — confinement as plot device.

Discussion Questions

- Clare maintains the Jace–Clary sibling reveal across the whole novel. Is that ethically defensible storytelling, or a manipulative tease?
- How does the introduction of Maia Roberts change the series's perspective on downworlders?
- Compare Valentine and the Inquisitor as figures of Shadowhunter authority. What does Clare want the reader to think about institutional power?
- Simon's transformation is the book's biggest character change. Is it sufficiently set up in book one?
- Magnus and Alec's relationship begins quietly. Why does Clare hold it at the edge of the main plot?
- Does the book's ending feel like a resolution, a pause, or a deliberate cliffhanger?

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